



## **Hearing of the Congressional Executive Commission on China (CECC)**

June 4, 2024

### **Testimony of Zhou Fengsuo**

#### **Executive Director of Human Rights in China and Student Leader at the 1989 Tiananmen Square Demonstrations**

In 2022, I attended a Halloween parade in Manhattan with a group of around fifty young people, dressed in protest garb and carrying signs challenging the Chinese Communist Party. I was the only older adult in the crowd, but I recognized many of the attendees. Several were students who would go on to organize major White Paper protests, and some were the children of fellow Tiananmen protestors. I had met many of them in prior months, as they visited the June 4<sup>th</sup> Memorial Museum. I was deeply touched when one protestor told me that they had spent seven months in prison a few years prior for commemorating the massacre on Tiananmen Square. As I stood in this crowd of young people, I felt very excited and inspired. Without any prompting, they shouted, “down with CCP, down with Xi Jinping.” At that moment, I was in tears. I realized that after 33 years, I was finally seeing the younger generation stepping up to carry the torch of freedom that I have carried with me ever since 1989, from Tiananmen Square.

In 1989, I was a student studying physics at Tsinghua University in Beijing. I was among the first to protest on Tiananmen Square when Hu Yaobang died, and I was among the last to leave when the tanks were rolling in, one only twenty feet from me. In between, I witnessed the most incredible outpouring of Chinese people in support of freedom and democracy. Millions of people gathered on Tiananmen Square from all walks of life: students, ordinary Chinese people, communist officials, Christians, and Buddhist monks. It was also my first time meeting people from Hong Kong, and witnessing their strong support. The solidarity at that moment was so overwhelming, strong, and inspiring. I installed dozens of loudspeakers on the Monument to the People’s Heroes at the center of the square, and for the first time, the people’s heartfelt voices were heard echoing across the huge plaza, at the center of China’s political power. In that moment, many Chinese people who were fearful and reticent became expressive and articulate. Freedom was in the air. Democracy was almost within reach.

I also witnessed the brutal massacre of these peaceful protestors by elite troops, armed with tanks and machine guns. The pungent smell of tear gas. The bullet holes on the buildings along the most important street in Beijing. The rolling tanks and armored vehicles, and the dead bodies outside of the hospital, laying in the bicycle shed because the hospital was so overwhelmed by those who were wounded and killed. The scene was that of a war zone; a war conducted by the CCP’s army against the Chinese people. I remember Zhong Qing, my younger schoolmate from

Tsinghua, who died for our shared dream of a better China. He was only a third-year student, studying in the instrument department at Tsinghua University. When I realized he was dead, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I realized I must carry on in his name, and continue speaking out on his behalf.

The protesters were not the only ones who suffered under the government's attack. The military's brutal siege of the city encountered courageous resistance from the people of Beijing. When martial law was first declared, millions of people came out to block the troops. Many of them stood still in front of the marching soldiers and rolling tanks in order to protect the student protestors like me. That is how we witnessed the great Tank Man, who has since become one of the most important icons of the last century, representing courage against overwhelming power and violence.

The whole world watched as the Chinese government turned against its own people and murdered peaceful protesters. Yet, the response from democratic countries was weak: the United States imposed only limited sanctions, and President H.W. Bush sent a special envoy to inform Deng Xiaoping of his support, even after this senseless massacre.<sup>1</sup> The CCP took the wrong path after 1989, setting the country on a trajectory of ever-increasing political repression and human right violations. That is why, later, this regime would put Uyghurs in concentration camps, force Tibetans into self-immolation, and deprive Hong Kong of its freedom. If a regime can use tanks in broad daylight to kill its own people and still enjoy the support of most democratic countries, there is no limit to what it could do, in terms of both internal repression and external aggression.

Domestically, the CCP chose to simply erase the memories of the massacre through censorship and brutal repression. It tightened its grip on free speech, banning any mention of the reality of what happened that summer, to the extent that many young people in China today have never heard of it. 28 years after my classmate Zhong Qing's death, his brother visited the Tiananmen Museum in Hong Kong. It was the first time that he learned why his older brother died.

Perhaps the CCP once could have taken a different path, transforming into a social democratic party, but the massacre and crackdown in 1989 eliminated the ability of this regime to be positively changed through mere trade and investment. United States policymakers have deliberately put their heads in the sand, ignoring the cause of human rights activists and political prisoners in China. This strategy may have brought short term gains in the form of increased profit, but appeasing the CCP for the benefit of trade has proven to be self-defeating and self-destructive. What Tiananmen told us 35 years ago, the most important lesson, is that the United States policy towards the CCP regime must focus on the democratization of China. Without democratization, the regime will become an even stronger threat towards universal values including freedom and human rights.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Other Tiananmen Papers: A ChinaFile Conversation," ChinaFile, Jul. 8, 2019, <https://www.chinafile.com/conversation/other-tiananmen-papers>.

Today, we remember Tiananmen because it reminds us of what a different China could have been; because Chinese people demonstrated their love of freedom and democracy through their protests and resistance. The fight didn't stop then—for most of us, it was only the beginning of our journey. There was Liu Xiaobo, who gave up a position as a visiting scholar at Columbia University to fly back to join the students on Tiananmen Square. He refused to leave China, and died as the first and only Nobel Peace laureate who died in prison without ever seeing the award. There is Xu Zhiyong, who was only a high school student when the massacre happened, but who was resolved from that moment on to dedicate his life to the dream of a free, democratic, and beautiful China. His New Citizens' Movement gained tens of thousands of followers, from all over China. He was recently sentenced to fourteen years in prison.

For me personally, it has been a privilege to work with these amazing freedom fighters, to raise awareness of their suffering, their sacrifices, their dreams, and their goals, and to support the Tiananmen Mothers, and other victims of the Tiananmen Massacre. Even though the Tiananmen protests and massacre remain a source of trauma for the Chinese people, it has simultaneously become a tremendous source of inspiration, healing, and hope. That's why I have collected many relics and artworks from 1989. Each of these items carries a story of life and death, of strength and endurance, that is difficult to find elsewhere.

Even though the CCP has tried, in many ways successfully, to erase the memory of the Tiananmen protests, it remains the most sought-after information for young people from China. They are eager to embrace the Tiananmen protests as a source of energy and inspiration. Many of them are willing to risk a lot to preserve the memory. Zeng Yuxuan, a law student from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, reached out to me when she saw that I was touring a banner in commemoration of Tiananmen. Tragically, she was arrested in Hong Kong for possessing this banner and sentenced to six months in prison, then sent back to China, and she has not been heard from since. I am always moved by her message about the Tiananmen protests. She told me that even though the great protests ended in tragedy, it is something precious that binds us all, across generations.

I am reminded, often, of this legacy that ties together everyone who has fought for freedom in China. When I heard of Peng Lifa, the Sitong Bridge Warrior, I was immediately reminded of the great feat of Tank Man in 1989. Peng Lifa staged his protest at the most visible place, during very tight security for the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. He used a loudspeaker and smoke generator so his message would be seen, and managed to broadcast for more than 30 minutes in Beijing before he was arrested and disappeared.

Miraculously, his message spread like wildfire. Although domestic censorship limited its initial reach, in the United States, in Berlin, in Toronto, in Tokyo, everywhere, Chinese students were mobilizing. They formed groups and stood up in the name of duty, a phrase borrowed from the now very famous Tiananmen slogan: "it's my duty," said a protestor riding a bicycle to Tiananmen Square. The voice of these young activists was carried back to China by tens of millions of VPN users, who were locked in their own homes under the Zero-COVID policy. Eventually, this spark of protest spread out across China, and grew in Shanghai after the unjust

deaths of Uyghur families in the Urumqi apartment fires, thus forcing the CCP to change their policy in response to people's protests for the first time in the CCP's history.

Their story, the story of the White Paper protesters, reverberates in me. The story of one young student who gingerly posted banners, then found friends and realized she wasn't alone, exactly mirrored what we went through in 1989. The moment that people began to gather, they realized that there are millions of people just like them that share the same opinions, but were forced into silence and indifference because of fear and self-censorship. But when they heard each other, they realized not only they were not alone, but their voices reflected the true voices of people in China who can't speak out. This happened 35 years ago on Tiananmen Square, but today these discussions happened on cyberspace, through platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and eventually flooded onto the heavily censored and surveilled domestic apps such as WeChat and Douyin.

Over the last five years, we have seen Uyghurs forced into concentration camps, the forced takeover of Hong Kong, Tibetan children torn away from their families, and, of course, the horrible Zero-COVID policy. We are undoubtedly in a dark moment for human rights in China. Yet, rather than giving up, Chinese people still fought to find their voice in cyberspace. Millions of people use VPNs to circumvent the Great Firewall. The internet is a vital place for civil society discourse and actions, when these kinds of activities are completely forbidden in China. There is, has been, and will be a huge impact on China through this space.

The White Paper Movement also showed that overseas diaspora organizations are important and effective in bringing change to China, even today. The voice of Peng Lifa was preserved outside of China, while it was silenced completely within China at first. It's because of his message reverberating back over China that eventually, people were able to act at the same time and under the same slogan. This is why Human Rights in China, my organization, wants to focus our work on digital rights, freedom of expression, and diaspora community building, especially among young people and new immigrants who are disillusioned by Xi Jinping.

I am also alarmed by the increasing censorship within China, which now extends to Hong Kong. The Tiananmen Massacre is, in many ways, a salient litmus test. For decades, Hong Kong held a yearly vigil for the victims of the massacre. Yet, since 2019, we have witnessed a city darkened by the CCP, while admirable heroes such as Chow Hang-tung, and others, have risked and lost everything for the sake of remembering Tiananmen. Just a few days ago, seven people in Hong Kong were arrested, including Chow Hang-tung, her mother and former colleagues, for continuing her work and posting on social media about the Tiananmen Massacre.

Unfortunately, Western tech companies have played a significant role in enabling the Chinese government's censorship. Two social media accounts on different platforms, belonging to Humanitarian China, an organization I co-founded, have been shut down because of our involvement in Tiananmen commemoration events. An FBI investigation revealed that

companies with business in China must comply with CCP directions on censorship.<sup>2</sup> During the White Paper Movement, the people used Apple's Airdrop technology to spread Peng Lifa's message, until the service was suddenly shut down, in another case of cooperation with the Chinese authorities. Apple did not respond to our concerns, even after student activist Wang Han protested with a week-long hunger strike in front of Apple headquarters.

Both the White Paper Movement and Tiananmen commemoration face the same strict online censorship, enabled by the willing cooperation of U.S. companies. This is where policymakers can make a difference. Through the White Paper Movement, we have seen proof that Chinese cyber-society has the power to influence China and bring in fundamental change. However, the companies that enable the existence of this vibrant cyber-society remain vulnerable to the CCP, and have not done enough to protect vulnerable users or stand up against the CCP's demands. Companies must be held to account for their role in supporting the CCP's censorship, surveillance, and harassment. I encourage Congress to investigate how U.S. tech companies comply with the CCP's demands, thus exposing every user to direct threat of surveillance.

Furthermore, I applaud the recent steps taken by law enforcement and Congress to push back against transnational repression, and I have seen perceptible changes in the environment. But the Chinese diaspora still lives in fear, in the shadow of the CCP's transnational repression. It is vitally important that we continue to work towards providing a secure environment for people to live free of persecution. In order to do so, the United States must center its policy towards China around China's democratization and respect towards human rights.

In conclusion, I thank the Congressional-Executive Commission on China for your unfailing support on this very important issue. On this 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Tiananmen, I urge you to listen to the voices of the Chinese people who have fought for freedom, and to protect the rights of those who seek to express themselves freely and openly. I believe in the future of a democratic, free, and beautiful China. Thank you.

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<sup>2</sup> Drew Harwell and Ellen Nakashima, "Federal prosecutors accuse Zoom executive of working with Chinese government to surveil users and suppress video calls," The Washington Post, Dec. 18, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/12/18/zoom-helped-china-surveillance/>.